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WAR-DEGENERACY OF THE CHURCH.

The church has always been right in regard to peace.—WILLIAM ALLEN, D. D.

NO. IV.

WAR-SENTIMENTS OF THE LAST GENERATION OF CHRISTIANS IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA.

PRESIDENT DAVIES, who died just before the commencement of the revolutionary war, may be taken as a fair specimen of the most evangelical Christians during the latter part of the eighteenth century. Eminently pious, animated with the most fervent zeal, and possessed of a strong intellect, and a bold, vigorous and exuberant imagination, he was probably the first popular preacher of his day, and certainly at the head of the American pulpit.

But listen to the echo even from his lips of the war-sentiments then prevalent among the Christians of America. I have now before me three or four of his sermons on war, full of the Tyrtaean inspiration, most of which frankly, earnestly avow their purpose of infusing a martial spirit into his hearers, and rousing them to deeds of revenge and blood. One of these discourses is entitled, *Religion and Patriotism the constituents of good Soldiers*, and seriously inculcates piety as “the best preparative to the dangers of war, the best incentive to true, rational courage. What can do you a lasting injury while you have a reconciled God smiling upon you from on high, a peaceful conscience animating you from within, and a happy immortality just before you? You have answered the ends of this life already by preparing for another; and how can you depart off this mortal stage more honorably than in the cause of liberty, of religion and your country? Virginians! Britons!

Christians! Protestants! if these names have any import or energy, will you not *strike home* in such a cause? Yes, this view of the matter must fire you into men; methinks the cowardly soul must tremble lest the imprecation of the prophet fall upon him, *Cursed be the man that keepeth back his sword from blood.* To this shocking, but necessary work, the Lord now calls you, and *cursed is he that doeth the work of the Lord deceitfully*—that will not perform it with all his might.—Where is the tender soul upon whom the passions of a husband, a father, or a son have a peculiar energy? Arise, and march away. I do entreat all of you who have not some very sufficient reason against it, voluntarily to enlist, and go forth with those brave souls who have set you so noble an example."

This illustrious pietist vindicates and even eulogises a war-spirit as one of God's rarest, most precious gifts to man! "The wise Creator has adapted the natural genius of mankind, with a surprising and beautiful variety, to the state in which they are placed in this world. To some he has given a turn for intellectual improvement and the liberal arts and sciences; and, as he knew that war would be the only method to preserve mankind from universal slavery, he has formed some men for this dreadful work, *and fired them with a martial spirit*, and a glorious love of danger. *Such a spirit is a public blessing*; it is as necessary in its place as any of the gentler geniuses among mankind; and it is derived from the same divine original. He that winged the imagination of a Homer or a Milton; he that gave penetration to the mind of a Newton; nay, he that sent out Paul and his brethren to conquer the nations with the gentle weapons of his truth and love, even the same gracious power has formed and raised up an Alexander, a Julius Cæsar, and a Marlboro', and inspired them with this enterprising, intrepid spirit.—Our continent is like to become the seat of war; and has God been pleased to diffuse some sparks of this martial fire through our country? *I hope he has*; and, though it has been almost extinguished by so long a peace, I hope it now begins to kindle anew. May I not produce you, my brethren,"—addressing the volunteers before him—"as instances of it? Well, *cherish it as a sacred, heaven-born fire*; and let the injuries done to your country administer fuel to it."

"Should I now," he says, in conclusion, "give vent to the passions of my heart, and become a speaker for my country, methinks I should even overwhelm you with a torrent of good wishes, and pray as from the hearts of thousands. May the Lord of

hosts go forth along with you? *May he teach your hands to war, and gird you with strength to battle!* May he bless you with a safe return and long life, or with a glorious death on the bed of honor, and a happy immortality! ”*

In another sermon on *the curse of cowardice*, preached on a muster-day (1758), “with a view to raise a company,” he boldly reverses the benedictions of our Saviour upon the peacemaker, and represents “even the God of peace at such a time as proclaiming by his providence, ‘to arms!’ Then the sword is consecrated to God, and the art of war becomes a part of our religion (!) Then happy is he that shall reward our enemies as they have served us. Ps. 137: 8. Blessed is the brave soldier; blessed is the defender of his country, and the destroyer of its enemies; but *cursed is he that keepeth back his sword from blood.*”

The whole discourse is pervaded with the same spirit. Refusal to engage in the war then waged with France, is denounced as “an enormous wickedness in the sight of God,” as “a moral evil, a gross wickedness, exposing the wretch to the heavy curse of God, both in this and the eternal world;” and we are solemnly assured, that upon such offences “the tremendous curse of Jehovah is still in full force even under the mild and gentle dispensation of the gospel.—Let us, then, in the name of the Lord of hosts, collect our whole strength, and give one decisive blow. O, for the influence of the Lord of armies, the God of battles, the Author of true courage, and every heroic virtue, to fire you into patriots and soldiers this moment! Ye that love your country, enlist; for honor will follow you in life or death in such a cause. You that love your religion, enlist; for your religion is in danger. Ye that would catch at money, here is a proper bait for you;—ten pounds for a few months’ service, besides the usual pay of soldiers. I seriously make the proposal as *a servant of the Most High God*; for I am fully persuaded that what I am recommending, is his will; and disobedience to it may expose you to his curse.”†

Such was the spirit, such the sentiments cherished by the best Christians in America before the Revolution; and that war kindled the spark into a flame, which blazed and raged from one end of the land to the other. But I need not quote speci-

* Davies’s Sermons, Vol. III, Ser. LXI.

† At the anniversary exercises of the Theological Seminary, Andover, in 1838, one of the students quoted some of these war-sentiments from Davies with commendation! I blushed for the degeneracy of my theological Alma Mater, but was glad to find that such an outrage upon the Christian sense of the nineteenth century was received by not a few of the hearers with disgust and abhorrence. Davies’s Sermons, Ser. LXIII.

mens from the clerical advocates here of that bloody conflict; for every body knows that nearly all the pulpits in the country rang with war-cries from lips consecrated to the work of preaching “peace on earth and good-will to men.” I will go to England itself, and gather illustrations from the Christians there who sympathized with our revolutionary fathers.

The Rev. Mr. Ryland, of Northampton, Eng., a Baptist minister of eminence, distinguished for his piety, benevolence and ardent feelings, superintended a seminary to which the father of the late Robert Hall took his son just in the hottest period of our revolutionary war; and, the conversation turning on its injustice and cruelty, Mr. Ryland soon waxed exceedingly warm, and exclaimed, “Why, Mr. Hall, if I were General Washington, I tell you what I would do. I would get all my brother-officers together; and, having procured a large punch-bowl, I would place them around it; I would be the first to bare my arm, and each man baring his arm, should let off his blood into the bowl. This done, we would each dip the point of his sword into the blood, and, lifting it on high, we would swear by Him that liveth for ever and ever, never again to sheathe our swords so long as an English soldier remained on the American shore. This is what I would do, brother Hall, if I were General Washington.”

Well did the late Robert Hall, in comment on this anecdote, say to a friend to whom he related it, “Only think of my condition;—a poor little boy just come out of my mother’s chimney-corner, and taken from home to hear this bloody-minded conversation. I assure you I was quite alarmed. I trembled at the idea of being left with so bloody-minded a master; and I fully expected that when my father left me, I should be bled too, and that every time I offended him, I should undergo the operation of the lancet. I did indeed, sir.”*

How strange that Robert Hall himself, the eloquent denouncer of war in general, should address a company of volunteers for the defence of England when threatened with an invasion from France, in language like the following! “Go, ye defenders of your country, accompanied with every auspicious omen; advance with alacrity into the field when God himself musters the hosts to war. Religion is too much interested in your success not to lend you her aid; she will shed over this enterprise her selectest influence. While you are engaged in the field, many will repair to the closet, many

* Herald of Peace, London, 1832, pp. 338, 339.

to the sanctuary ; the feeble hands which are unequal to any other weapon, will grasp the sword of the Spirit ; and from myriads of humble, contrite hearts, the voice of intercession, supplication and weeping will mingle in its ascent to heaven with the shouts of battle, and the shock of arms.—I cannot but imagine the virtuous heroes, legislators and patriots of every age and country are bending from their elevated seats to witness this contest, as if they were incapable, till it be brought to a favorable issue, of enjoying their eternal repose. Enjoy that repose, illustrious immortals ! Your mantle fell when you ascended ; and thousands, inflamed with your spirit, are ready to *swear by Him that sitteth upon the throne, and liveth for ever and ever*, they will protect freedom in her last asylum, and never desert that cause which you sustained by your labors, and cemented with your blood. And thou, sole Ruler among the children of men, *gird on thy sword, thou Most Mighty*, and go forth with our hosts in the day of battle ! Pour into their hearts the spirit of departed heroes ! Inspire them with thine own ; and, while led by thine hand, and fighting under thy banners, open their eyes to behold in every valley, and in every plain,—what the prophet beheld by the same illumination,—chariots of fire and horses of fire ! ”

Such is the mildest form of the war-sentiments in which all Christendom has been educated from time immemorial. The church has in fact been turned into a school of war ; the pulpit has been its apologist, its abettor and its eulogist ; the altar itself, even the table sacred to the memory of the Prince of peace, has been prostituted to its purposes of wrath and blood. Not one minister in a hundred, not one Christian in a thousand after the time of Constantine, ever seriously reflected, before the present generation, on the utter incompatibility of war in all its forms with a religion of universal peace and love.

But is the church as a body now reclaimed from her war-degeneracy of ages ? Alas ! essentially the same sentiments pervade the great mass of both nominal and real Christians through the world. Here and there you may find a little Goshen in this vast moral Egypt ; but I might gather from evangelical writers even in our own country the most ample proof that the church of Christ is even now gangrened with the war-spirit, and lending her sanction to principles and practices which would render this custom perpetual.

* Hall's Works, Vol. I, pp. 110, 111.